



War of words: Saudi Arabia v Iran

by Florence Gaub

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been rocky for the better part of the last century. Not only have the two Middle Eastern powerhouses regularly resorted to drastic measures (including occupying each other's embassies and suspending diplomatic relations), they have also repeatedly employed emotive language and hyperbolic phrases to express their respective feelings.

Five decades and four kings

Saudi Arabia's first king, Abdelaziz – also known as Ibn Saud – finally conquers all of what is today Saudi Arabia after two decades of guerrilla war in 1924. One year later, Reza Khan establishes the Pahlavi dynasty and becomes the shah of Persia. Relations between the two new regimes begin on an unpleasant note: in 1925, Persia protests the partial destruction of a Shiite burial site in Saudi Arabia, leading to a ban on Persian pilgrims in the following years. Despite this initial setback, the two countries sign a Friendship Treaty in 1929 and establish formal diplomatic relations.

The issue of pilgrimage continues to poison ties, however. In 1943, Iran (which changed its name in 1935 and now under the leadership of Shah Muhammad Reza) complains about the beheading of one of its pilgrims in Saudi Arabia.

This leads, once again, to a ban on Iranian pilgrims until 1948. Relations begin to warm somewhat in 1955: King Saud visits Iran, and the shah reciprocates two years later. In 1966, successor King Faisal pays a visit to Tehran – but the shah's return visit in 1968 is abruptly cancelled. The reason: Saudi Arabia's expressed support for Bahraini independence – a territory which Iran claims (then) as its 14th province. The state visit nevertheless materialises a few months later when the two states sign an agreement delineating their maritime borders.

The two heads of state continue to exchange views by letter. In one, the shah writes:

'Please, my brother, modernise. Open up your country. Make the schools mixed [sic] women and men. Let women wear miniskirts. Have discos. Be modern. Otherwise I cannot guarantee you will stay in your throne.'

The king allegedly replies: 'Your majesty, I appreciate your advice. May I remind you, you are not the shah of France. You are not in the Élysée. You are in Iran. Your population is 90% Muslim. Please don't forget that.'

Although the shah recognises that the two states “could become the nucleus for stability and progress in the Persian Gulf” he privately holds rather a derogatory opinion of Saudi Arabia which he considers underdeveloped:

“Nixon would like to consign us to the level of the most backward countries in the whole Middle East. Why lower us to the standard of the Saudis rather than raising the Saudis to meet us?”

Saudi Arabia and Iran disagree during those years on the recognition of Israel, and in particular on the independence and territoriality of the smaller Gulf states. In 1971, Iran seizes three islands in the Persian Gulf (which the United Arab Emirates (UAE) still claim today). This notwithstanding, they manage to maintain a working relationship.

Higher tones

This changes when the Islamic revolution topples the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979. Although somewhat apprehensive about revolutionary regime change, Saudi Arabia initially welcomes the new government. In a statement, King Khalid personally congratulates the founder of the new republic Ruhollah Khomeini, stating that “Islamic solidarity” could be the basis for closer relations of two countries.

But Ayatollah Khomeini’s claim to be the leader of the Muslim world does not go down well with Riyadh, which not only claims the same but also tacitly supports Iraq during its war with Iran. Things turn particularly sour when Iranian pilgrims clash with Saudi security forces first in 1986 and again in 1987, leading to several hundred casualties. Several Iranian politicians resort to strong rhetoric as a reaction. The (then) chairman of the Iranian parliament Rafsanjani states that:

“Iran must uproot the Saudi rulers... and divest the control of the shrines from them. [...] The martyr’s blood must be avenged by burning the roots of Saudi rulers in the region. The true revenge is to remove the colossal and precious wealth belonging to the Islamic world which lies under the soil of the Arabian Peninsula from the control of the criminal, the agents of colonialism. The Saudi rulers have chosen an evil path, and we will send them to hell.”

Khomeini echoes these words by saying:

“Even if it were possible to forgive Saddam Hussein, it would never be possible to forgive Saudi Arabia. [...] these vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back [...] Mecca is in the hands of a band of heretics.”

This incident leads to an attack on Saudi Arabia’s embassy in Tehran and a reduction of the Iranian quota to the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Diplomatic ties are eventually severed and the Hajj is completely suspended in 1988. Iran’s support to dissident groups in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states further contributes to frosty relations.

Relations are re-established in 1991, with Saudi Arabia and Iran both united in opposition to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Tensions perhaps ease with Khomeini’s death in 1989, although his last will and testament notes:

“Muslims should curse and fight tyrants, including and especially the Saudi royal family, these traitors to God’s great shrine, may God’s curse and that of his prophets and angels be upon them. King Fahd spreads a large part of the people’s wealth every year on the anti-Koranic, totally baseless and superstitious faith of Wahhabism. He abuses Islam and the dear Koran. Curse this traitor to God.”

One step forward...

Relations between newly-elected Iranian President Rafsanjani and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia are surprisingly constructive. King Fahd prepares the terrain in the mid-1980s when he invites Rafsanjani to the Hajj and declares:

“What does Iran want from all that is happening? Iran has harmed relations not only with us but also with its neighbours and the whole world. [...] Iran has attacked Kuwait and the UAE and struck at our merchant ships. Who benefits from this? Why undermine peace in the region while it is possible to attain coexistence and spare Muslims’ blood and money? [...] We want reason and logic to triumph so that peace will prevail in the region. We want the moderate minds to play their role in Iran.”

He continues:

[...] At our end, we stopped media campaigns against Iran. (Iran) has all that can enable it to live in peace without interfering in others' internal affairs. We want good relations with everyone. We want Iran to become a strength for Islam."

Saudi Arabia also pushes for the 1990 summit declaration in which the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states that it:

"Welcomes the prospect of future cooperation and Iranian participation in regional security arrangement."

Iran's President Rafsanjani replies on a conciliatory note in 1992:

"Iran's foreign policy is based on development and expansion of friendly relations with neighbouring countries in particular Persian Gulf countries."

A real breakthrough occurs, however, under the presidency of Muhammad Khatami. In 1998, the two states sign a comprehensive cooperation agreement, which is followed by a state visit to Saudi Arabia by Khatami. King Fahd seizes the moment to urge other Gulf countries to improve their relations with Iran:

"It is in the interest of all the countries of the Gulf to improve relations with Iran. [...] all the other countries should follow Saudi Arabia's lead."

...and two steps back?

The decade following the 2003 invasion of Iraq spells trouble for Saudi-Iranian relations. While this is in part due to Tehran's suspected nuclear programme and Saudi concerns over Iranian influence in Baghdad and Beirut, personalities matter, too. The election of Ahmadinejad as president in 2005 does nothing to ease tensions with Riyadh. Although Ahmadinejad visits Saudi Arabia in 2007 (and is invited as a guest to the GCC summit), he also reasserts Iranian claims to the islands claimed

by the UAE. In 2008, King Abdullah reportedly asks then US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, and General David Petraeus to "cut off the head of the snake", pushing for a military intervention against Iran.

In a face-to-face meeting, the king accuses Iran's foreign minister Mottaki of "interfering in Arab affairs", to which Mottaki replies "these are Muslims". The king counters:

"No, Arabs. You as Persians have no business meddling in Arab matters."

As another crisis erupts in Yemen in 2010, Iranian foreign minister Velayati voices the idea that the Houthis should become to Yemen what Hizbullah is to Lebanon – with Iran's help. At the same time, President Ahmadinejad strongly criticises Saudi Arabia's handling of the crisis:

"Saudi Arabia was expected to mediate in Yemen's internal conflict as an older brother and restore peace to the Muslim state, rather than launching military strike[s] and pounding bombs on Muslim civilians in the north of Yemen."

Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal responds with the accusation that it is in fact Iran which is meddling in Yemen's internal affairs, in a clear reference to Velayati's words. As the dispute over the Gulf's name – Persian versus Arab – reaches new heights, Ahmadinejad escalates further by declaring that:

"There are some countries in the Middle East region that do not hold even a single election, don't allow women to drive, but the US and European governments are supporting their undemocratic governments."

In 2011, both the US and Saudi Arabia accuse Iran of having plotted the assassination of its ambassador to Washington (and now foreign minister) Adel al-Jubeir.

New lows

Hassan Rouhani becomes Iran's president and there is renewed hope for the normalisation of relations. In 2013, he calls for closer ties with Saudi Arabia,



hailing the kingdom as a “friend and brother” of Iran. He says his government is “willing to remove trivial tensions from the path in order to fulfil bilateral and the Islamic world’s interests.” But the deteriorating regional environment, disagreement over Syria and the nuclear deal give way to inflammatory rhetoric.

When Saudi Arabia launches its operation Decisive Storm in Yemen in March 2015, Ayatollah Khamenei declares that:

“The aggression by Saudi Arabia against Yemen and its innocent people was a mistake, this is a crime and genocide that can be prosecuted in the international courts.”

Meanwhile, newly crowned King Salman requests help from the US “to combat Iranian mischief.” Later that year, a stampede during the annual pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia kills at least 464 Iranian pilgrims and triggers strong reactions from Iranian politicians.

Ahmad Reza Pourdastan, the Iranian army commander states that:

“The al-Saud is a hated family and just understands the language of power. The al-Saud understands nothing but the language of force and one should speak with it merely with the language of power.”

Major General Muhammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) also goes on record with the quote:

“the Islamic revolution is advancing with good speed, its example being the ever-increasing export of the revolution. Today, not only Palestine and Lebanon acknowledge the influential role of the Islamic republic but so do the people of Iraq and Syria. [...] the phase of the export of the revolution has entered a new chapter.”

Meanwhile, Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Supreme National Security Council, boasts that Iran has a military presence in the Mediterranean Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb, a strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Ali Reza Zakani, Tehran city representative in the Iranian parliament, states that:

“With the fall of Yemen’s capital Sana’a under the control of Shiite Houthi militia, four Arab capitals have today ended up in the hands of Iran and belong to the Islamic Iranian revolution. The Yemeni revolution will not be confined to Yemen alone. It will extend, following its success, into Saudi territories. The Yemeni-Saudi vast borders will help accelerate its reach into the depths of Saudi land.”

Saudi Arabia retaliates. In November 2015, Abdallah al-Askar, chairman of Saudi Arabia’s Shura Council says:

“The government of Iran, month after month, has proven that it has an ugly agenda in the region.”

Following the execution of a Shiite cleric in Saudi Arabia in early 2016, Ayatollah Khamenei tweets:

‘The only act of #SheikhNimr was outspoken criticism, [...] the unfairly-spilled blood of oppressed martyr #SheikhNimr will affect rapidly & divine revenge will seize Saudi politicians.’

Saudi Arabia’s embassy is stormed by Iranian protesters, and relations are again suspended. Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir announces:

“What does Iran have to do with this? [...] for the Iranians to inject themselves into our domestic affairs is in-line with what Iran has been doing for years throughout the region; in Lebanon, in Syria, in Iraq, in Bahrain, in Yemen. They have been providing supplies for terrorists, they have been recruiting people, they have been assassinating people, they have been sowing sectarianism in the region, splitting the Islamic world. [...] so we have decided to say enough is enough and as a consequence we cut off our ties with the Iranians. [...] Iran should back-off, they should stop being aggressive they should stop interfering in the affairs of their neighbours, they should stop supporting terrorism, isn’t that what all of us around the world want?”

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